

Local ACLU Opposes Bill on CIA Data

By GENE BLAKE, Times Staff Writer

Breaking ranks with the national ACLU, the ACLU of Southern California is opposing a bill that would exempt most of the Central Intelligence Agency's operational files from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act.

The local affiliate's executive committee voted unanimously last week to lobby against the bill that has already won the support of the national organization. But Ramona Ripston, executive director of the ACLU of Southern California, said it is "not a major split."

Pointing out that American Civil Liberties Union affiliates have a great deal of autonomy, Ripston said this is an issue on which "reasonable people can differ."

She said opposition letters have been sent to each member of the House Government Operations Committee, which held hearings last month on the bill, which already has been approved by the Senate.

Fifty other ACLU affiliates around the country have been urged to join in opposing the bill, and a vote on the matter later this month by the national board of directors is being sought, Ripston added.

Backlog Cited

Under present law, when a request for disclosure is made under the Freedom of Information Act, the CIA must examine every line of all relevant documents. The agency then may delete classified information and anything related to methods of intelligence gathering.

CIA officials say this has created a two- to three-year backlog of requests. They want to be relieved of the burden of searching and reviewing documents that ultimately are not released.

The bill under consideration would permit the CIA director to designate certain files as exempt from search, review, publication or disclosure.

An exempt document would have to be in the Office of Security, the Directorate of Operations or the Directorate for Science and Technology.

It also would have to deal with certain subjects, such as the conduct of foreign intelligence, counterintelligence operations, background investigations of informants, liaison arrangements with other governments and scientific and technical means of gathering intelligence.

The exemptions would not pertain to requests by U.S. citizens or resident aliens for their own files, requests for information on activity that can be disclosed under other Freedom of Information Act provisions or matters

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relating to investigations of CIA improprieties.

The bill won the support of the national ACLU last year as a means of reducing the backlog of requests. Ira Glasser, executive director of the national ACLU, has predicted it would not be the disaster feared by some.

Even Morton Halperin, director of the Center for National Security Studies, an ACLU project that is a major user of the Freedom of Information Act to obtain CIA information, supports the bill.

Halperin, pointing out that it now takes three years to get information instead of three weeks, claimed that the exemptions would not create loopholes that would allow the CIA to hide information that the public should have.

Nevertheless, some civil libertarians criticize the national ACLU's support for the exemptions in view of the ACLU's consistent opposition to efforts of the Reagan Administration to weaken the law.

Members of the Southern California affiliate's executive committee expressed concern that the definition of exempt documents is too broad. They fear that it would create a temptation to include more information in the operational file.

A reduction in the request backlog would be only a modest gain compared to the possibility that exemptions could be used to conceal information, they contend.

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